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by the War Food Administration  
Washington 25, D.C.

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Wheat Goes to War

Address by Marvin Jones, War Food Administrator, over Farm and Home Hour, Wednesday, March 1, 1944 at 12:30 PM, E.W.T.

Wheat is older than history. The Chinese used it 2700 years before Christ. It was used in Egypt a thousand years earlier than that. It was cultivated by the prehistoric races such as the Swiss Lake Dwellers, and has been found in the pyramids and in Egyptian tombs. Wheat is often referred to in the Bible, which tells of separating the wheat from the chaff.

The ancient civilizations of Babylonia, Egypt, Crete, Greece and Rome were based on wheat as one of the principal food plants. The stories run back until they are lost amid the mysteries of tradition. All stone age findings include grinding bowls and pestles. These were the first crude flour mills.

Through the centuries wheat has been the chief ingredient in the "staff of life." Wheat therefore is of universal interest.

When the history of this war is written, there will be one chapter on wheat. That chapter cannot be written yet because no one knows the ending. But the story to date deserves our attention now.

Wheat was important in the other war—as food. It is important in this war—as food and more than food. As a basis for industrial alcohol it goes to war as synthetic rubber in a hundred forms. It goes to war as smokeless powder for our guns. It goes to war as shatterproof glass for our planes and trucks. Its use as feed for livestock is now at a rate four times what it was pre-war. Because of this use by livestock, wheat now goes to war on fronts throughout the world in concentrated forms, as dried eggs, and dried milk, as butter and cheese and meat.

There are other differences. Wheat is a bulky food requiring a lot of shipping space in proportion to its food value, but during the other war we sent two or three hundred million bushels a year to our Allies in Europe. In this war we have become temporarily a net importer of wheat. Now we use more wheat as livestock feed and for industrial alcohol in a year than we shipped to Europe in any two years during the other war.

And here is another difference. During the other war we in the United States were asked to observe two wheatless days a week, and we were asked to have one wheatless meal a day. We remember the food regulations of the Food Administrator of that time which forbade us to buy wheat flour without buying an equal amount of substitutes.

Today is the first of March. In March 1918 the Food Administrator asked that no wheat or wheat products be served in hotels or restaurants until after the harvest. In this war we are now actually eating 60 million bushels per year more than we did pre-war and much of this is in the form of enriched flour and bread. That is another important difference. There are others.

In January 1918 the British Food Controller sent a cable to the United States Food Administrator which read in part as follows: "Unless you are able to send... wheat...I cannot take the responsibility of assuring our people that there will be food enough to win the war. Imperative necessity compels me to cable you in this blunt way. It now lies with America to decide whether or not the Allies in Europe shall have bread..."

We furnished them that bread. This war will not be won by bread alone, but by wheat in other forms as well.

Due to soil conservation and other improved methods our production of wheat for the past three years has been the largest of any three consecutive years on record. Our goals for this year call for a still greater production. Wheat is a national crop. There are scores of types and varieties grown in many States. Nothing is more beautiful or inspiring than a field of ripening grain waving in the sunshine on our vast prairies.

If our stocks this July, after two years of war, should drop to 300 million bushels, as seems likely because of our heavy uses of wheat for livestock feed and for industrial alcohol, our reserves would be low but they would still be more than three times the size of our stocks in July 1919.

Another important difference is in the realm of price. Prices generally have been more stable than in the other war. We hope to avoid the morning-after headache that was felt 'round the world, when the price of wheat crashed to ruinous levels in the aftermath of the other war.

I have mentioned these differences, in order to outline some of our current wheat problems against the helpful background of experience. But this experience will have been in vain unless it points the way toward meeting some of the problems that confront us now. One problem is to maintain an adequate supply, and particularly a domestic supply, because of the shipping hazard.

We must make certain that there will be plenty of wheat for our Armed Forces and for our civilian needs, as well as for essential needs for livestock feed in the deficit areas and our industrial alcohol plants for synthetic rubber. So far we have had no wheatless days in this war. We hope to avoid them if possible.

It was for this reason that, in spite of our tremendous supplies on hand, and in spite of our record production of the last three years, all restrictions were removed on all food crops and our goals of 1944 have been increased.

Other safeguarding steps have been taken. To prevent another price disaster, the Congress, with the approval of the President, has protected producers of basic commodities including wheat by authorizing and directing loans at not less than 85 percent of parity for the two-year period following the end of the war. Wheat farmers who remember the previous price disaster will know the value of this protection.

Every effort is being made to limit the amount of wheat used for livestock feeding to the most essential and efficient uses.

Increased shipments of molasses are being imported for industrial alcohol and for feed purposes, in order to reduce the amount of wheat used for these purposes.

Then, still further to protect our supply, we have been drawing on Canada's large stocks of wheat to help meet our extra needs. Transportation difficulties prevent bringing in as much of this Canadian surplus as we would like, but substantial shipments have been made. Meantime, this reserve supply exists as a safeguard against the possibility of a reduced crop this year or next, or for unexpected needs that may develop.

Fortunately, for the present at least, the world has an adequate supply of wheat. The principal problem is more one of transportation than of supply.

This fact suggests the ever important problem of what will happen after the war. We must remember that wheat is a world commodity, with many foreign trade complexities. It is probably the most widely grown food crop in the world. It grows in 50 different countries. It is important even in China, which normally produces more wheat than any other country in the world except our own and Russia.

Because of this importance of wheat both as food and feed, domestically and in world trade, wheat has always been an agricultural problem child of this and other governments.

Many nations have tried to meet this problem. Even before the war all important wheat exporting and importing countries had various direct government measures designed to support wheat prices. All the foreign major exporting countries now have guaranteed prices to producers.

Under these conditions it is wise to have the fullest possible cooperation with all these countries to avoid alternate periods of surplus and scarcity, which injure all concerned and in the end benefit no one. Progress has been made along these lines.

In June 1942 a wheat agreement was entered into by the five principal export wheat producing countries: the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Argentina and Australia. That agreement lays the groundwork for international cooperation once the war is over. It provides for the full use of world markets so that consumers will have plenty, while the producers will be protected against the disastrous effects of widely fluctuating prices. We, of course, must have a full part in those markets. We want expanded production for expanded use just as far and as rapidly as it is possible to achieve it along practical lines. This means, of course, expanded production of finished articles as well as of raw materials, and at fair prices for both.

If by joint action we can solve some of the basic problems affecting these important commodities in foreign trade, such as wheat, for instance, we will have taken an important step against misunderstandings and will have made real progress toward maintaining peace.

